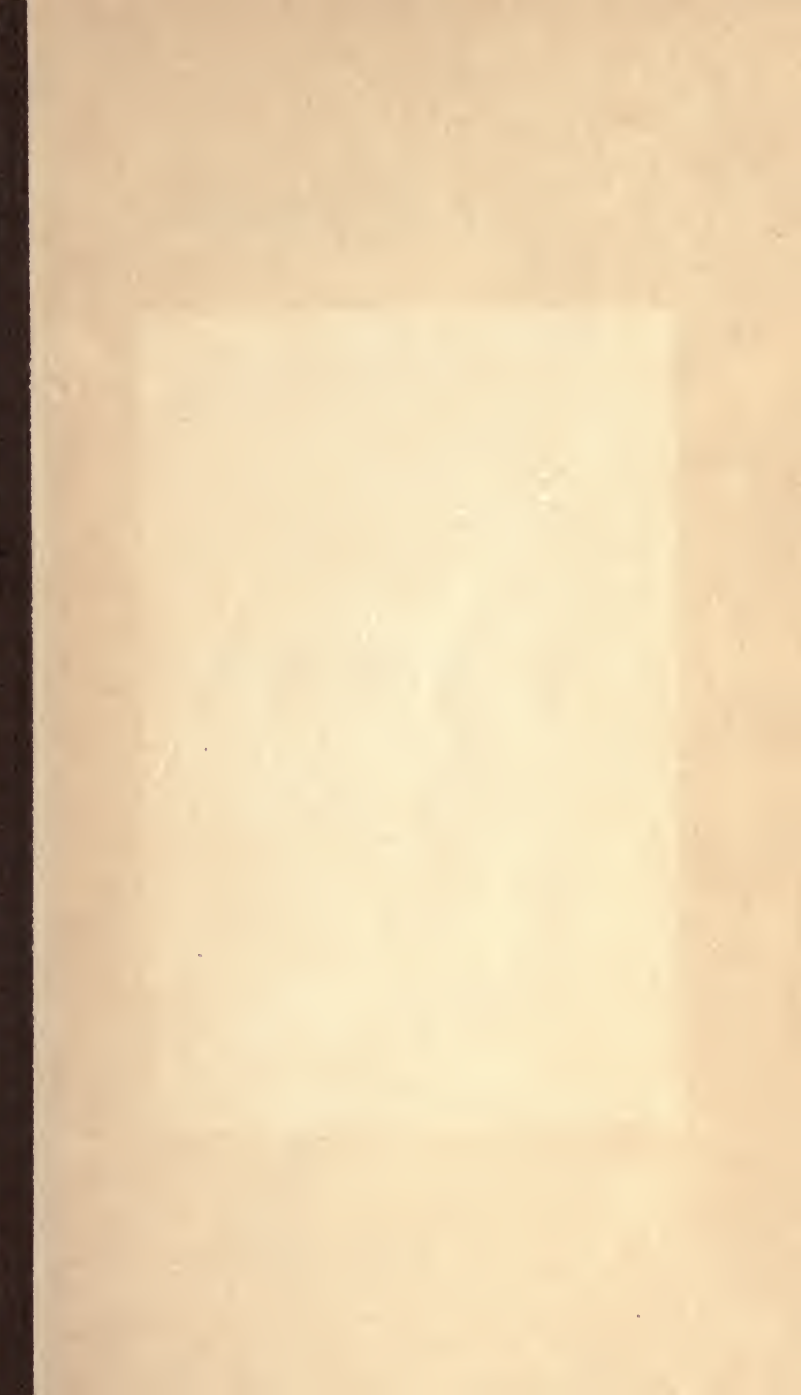


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AGATHA.

BY

GEORGE ELIOT.

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THE
MIND
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AGATHA.

COME with me to the mountains, not where rocks
Soar harsh above the troops of hurrying pines,
But where the earth spreads soft and rounded breasts
To feed her children; where the generous hills
Lift a green isle betwixt the sky and plain
To keep some old-world things aloof from change.
Here too 'tis hill and hollow: new-born streams
With sweet enforcement, joyously compelled
Like laughing children, hurry down the steeps,
And make a dimpled chase athwart the stones;
Pine woods are black upon the heights, the slopes
Are green with pasture, and the bearded corn
Fringes the blue above the sudden ridge:
A little world whose round horizon cuts
This isle of hills with heaven for a sea,
Save in clear moments when south-westward gleams
France by the Rhine, melting anon to haze.
The monks of old chose here their still retreat,
And called it by the Blessed Virgin's name,

Sancta Maria, which the peasant's tongue,
Speaking from out the parent's heart that turns
All loved things into little things, has made
Sanct Märgen—Holy little Mary, dear
As all the sweet home things she smiles upon,
The children and the cows, the apple trees,
The cart, the plough, all named with that caress
Which feigns them little, easy to be held,
Familiar to the eyes and hand and heart.
What though a Queen? She puts her crown away,
And with her little Boy wears common clothes,
Caring for common wants, remembering
That day when good Saint Joseph left his work
To marry her, with humble trust sublime.
The monks are gone, their shadows fall no more
Tall frocked and cowed athwart the evening fields
At milking time; their silent corridors
Are turned to homes of bare-armed, aproned men,
Who toil for wife and children. But the bells,
Pealing on high from two quaint convent towers,
Still ring the Catholic signals, summoning
To grave remembrance of the larger life
That bears our own, like perishable fruit,
Upon its heaven-wide branches. At their sound
The shepherd boy far off upon the hill,
The workers with the saw and at the forge,
The triple generation round the hearth—
Grandames and mothers and the flute-voiced girls—
Fall on their knees and send forth prayerful cries
To the kind Mother with the little Boy,
Who pleads for helpless men against the storm,
Lightning and plagues and all terrific shapes
Of power supreme.

Within the prettiest hollow of these hills,
Just as you enter it, upon the slope
Stands a low cottage, neighbored cheerily
By running water, which at farthest end
Of the same hollow, turns a heavy mill,
And feeds the pasture for the miller's cows
Blanchi and Nägeli, Veilchen and the rest,
Matrons with faces as Griselda mild,
Coming at call. And on the farthest height
A little tower looks out above the pines
Where mounting you will find a sanctuary
Open and still; without, the silent crowd
Of heaven-planted, incense-mingling flowers;
Within, the altar where the Mother sits
'Mid votive tablets hung from far-off years
By peasants succoured in the peril of fire
Fever or flood, who thought that Mary's love
Willing but not omnipotent had stood
Between their lives and that dread power which slew
Their neighbour at their side. The chapel bell
Will melt to gentlest music ere it reach
That cottage on the slope, whose garden gate
Has caught the rose tree-boughs and stands ajar;
So does the door to let the sunbeams in;
For in the slanting sunbeams angels come
And visit Agatha who dwells within—
Old Agatha whose cousins Kate and Nell
Are housed by her in Love and Duty's name,
They being feeble, with small withered wits,
And she believing that the higher gift
Was given to be shared. So Agatha
Shares her one room, all neat on afternoons

As if some memory were sacred there
 And everything within the four low walls
 An honoured relic.

One long summer's day
 An angel entered at the rose-hung gate
 With skirts pale blue, a brow to quench the pearl,
 Hair soft and blonde as infants', plenteous
 As hers who made the wavy lengths once speak
 The grateful worship of a rescued soul.
 The angel paused before the open door
 To give good day. "Come in," said Agatha.
 I followed close and watched and listened there.
 The angel was a lady, noble, young,
 Taught in all seemliness that fits a court,
 All lore that shapes the mind to delicate use,
 Yet quiet, lowly, as a meek white dove
 That with its presence teaches gentleness.
 Men called her Countess Linda; little girls
 In Freiburg town, orphans whom she caressed,
 Said Mamma Linda: yet her years were few,
 Her outward beauties all in budding time,
 Her virtues the aroma of the plant
 That dwells in all its being, root, stem, leaf,
 And waits not ripeness.

"Sit," said Agatha.

Her cousins were at work in neighbouring homes
 But yet she was not lonely: all things round
 Seemed filled with noiseless yet responsive life
 As of a child at breast that gently clings:
 Not sunlight only or the breathing flowers
 Or the swift shadows of the birds and bees;
 But all the household goods, which, polished fair

By hands that cherished them for service done,
Shone as with glad content. The wooden beams
Dark and yet friendly, easy to be reached,
Bore three white crosses for a speaking sign ;
The walls had little pictures hung a-row,
Telling the stories of Saint Ursula,
And Saint Elizabeth, the lowly queen ;
And on the bench that served for table too,
Skirting the wall to save the narrow space,
There lay the Catholic books, inherited
From those old times when printing still was young
With stout-limbed promise, like a sturdy boy.
And in the farthest corner stood the bed
Where o'er the pillow hung two pictures wreathed
With fresh-plucked ivy: one the Virgin's death,
And one her flowering tomb, while high above
She smiling bends and lets her girdle down
For ladder to the soul that cannot trust
In life which outlasts burial. Agatha
Sat at her knitting, aged, upright, slim,
And spoke her welcome with mild dignity.
She kept the company of kings and queens
And mitred Saints who sat below the feet
Of Francis with the ragged frock and wounds : .
And Rank for her meant Duty, various
Yet equal in its worth, done worthily.
Command was service ; humblest service done
By willing and discerning souls was glory.

Fair Countess Linda sat upon the bench,
Close fronting the old knitter, and they talked
With sweet antiphony of young and old.

AGATHA.

AGATHA.

“You like our valley, Lady? I am glad
You thought it well to come again. But rest—
The walk is long from Master Michael’s inn.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“Yes, but no walk is prettier.”

AGATHA.

“It is true:
There lacks no blessing here, the waters all
Have virtues like the garments of the Lord
And heal much sickness; then, the crops and cows
Flourish past speaking, and the garden flowers,
Pink, blue, and purple, ’tis a joy to see
How they yield honey for the singing bees.
I would the whole world were as good a home.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“And you are well off, Agatha?—your friends
Left you a certain bread: is it not so?”

AGATHA.

“Not so at all, dear Lady. I had nought,
Was a poor orphan; but I came to tend
Here in this house an old afflicted pair,
Who wore out slowly, and the last who died,
Full thirty years ago, left me this roof
And all the household stuff. It was great wealth;
And so I had a home for Kate and Nell.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“But how, then, have you earned your daily bread
These thirty years?”

AGATHA.

“Oh, that is easy earning.

We help the neighbours, and our bit and sup
Is never failing: they have work for us
In house and field, all sorts of odds and ends,
Patching and mending, turning o’er the hay,
Holding sick children—there is always work;
And they are very good—the neighbours are:
Weigh not our bits of work with weight and scale,
But glad themselves with giving us good shares
Of meat and drink; and in the big farmhouse
When cloth comes home from weaving, the good wife
Cuts me a piece—this very gown—and says,
‘Here, Agatha, you old maid, you have time
To pray for Hans who is gone soldiering:
The saints might help him, and they have much to do.
’Twere well they were besought to think of him.’
She spoke half jesting, but I pray, I pray
For poor young Hans. I take it much to heart
That other people are worse off than I—
I ease my soul with praying for them all.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“That is your way of singing, Agatha;
Just as the nightingales pour forth sad songs,
And when they reach men’s ears they make men’s
 hearts
Feel the more kindly.”

AGATHA.

AGATHA.

“Nay, I cannot sing :
 My voice is hoarse, and oft I think my prayers
 Are foolish, feeble things ; for Christ is good
 Whether I pray or not—the Virgin’s heart
 Is kinder far than mine ; and then I stop
 And feel I can do nought toward helping men,
 Till out it comes, like tears that will not hold,
 And I must pray again for all the world.
 ’Tis good to me—I mean the neighbours are :
 To Kate and Nell too. I have money saved
 To go on pilgrimage the second time.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“And do you mean to go on pilgrimage
 With all your years to carry, Agatha?”

AGATHA.

“The years are light, dear Lady : ’tis my sins
 Are heavier than I would. And I shall go
 All the way to Eislében with that load :
 I need to work it off.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“What sort of sins,
 Dear Agatha ? I think they must be small.”

AGATHA.

“Nay, but they may be greater than I know ;
 ’Tis but dim light I see by. So I try
 All ways I know of to be cleansed and pure.
 I would not sink where evil spirits are.
 There’s perfect goodness somewhere : so I strive.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“You were the better for that pilgrimage
You made before? The shrine is beautiful,
And then you saw fresh country all the way.”

AGATHA.

“Yes, that is true. And ever since that time
The world seems greater, and the Holy Church
More wonderful. The blessed pictures all,
The heavenly images with books and wings,
Are company to me through the day and night.
The time! the time! It never seemed far back—
Only to father’s father and his kin
That lived before him. But the time stretched out
After that pilgrimage: I seemed to see
Far back, and yet I knew time lay behind,
As there are countries lying still behind,
The highest mountains, there in Switzerland.
Oh, it is great to go on pilgrimage!”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“Perhaps some neighbours will be pilgrims too,
And you can start together in a band.”

AGATHA.

“Not from these hills: people are busy here,
The beasts want tendance. One who is not missed
Can go and pray for others who must work.
I owe it to all neighbours, young and old;
For they are good past thinking—lads and girls
Given to mischief, merry naughtiness,
Quiet it, as the hedgehogs smooth their spines

For fear of hurting poor old Agatha.
 'Tis pretty: why, the cherubs in the sky
 Look young and merry, and the angels play
 On citherns, lutes, and all sweet instruments.
 I would have young things merry. See the Lord!
 A little Baby playing with the birds;
 And how the Blessed Mother smiles at him."

COUNTESS LINDA.

"I think you are too happy, Agatha,
 To care for heaven. Earth contents you well."

AGATHA.

"Nay, nay, I shall be called and I shall go
 Right willingly. I shall get helpless, blind,
 Be like an old stalk to be plucked away:
 The garden must be cleared for young spring plants.
 'Tis home beyond the grave, the most are there,
 All those we pray to, all the church's lights—
 And poor old souls are welcome in their rags:
 One sees it by the pictures. Good Saint Ann,
 The Virgin's mother, she is very old,
 And had her troubles with her husband too.
 Poor Kate and Nell are younger far than I,
 But they will have this roof to cover them.
 I shall go willingly; and willingness
 Makes the yoke easy and the burden light."

COUNTESS LINDA.

"When you go southward in your pilgrimage,
 Come to see me in Freiburg, Agatha.
 Where you have friends you should not go to inns."

AGATHA.

“Yes, I will gladly come to see you, lady.
And you will give me sweet hay for a bed,
And in the morning I shall wake betimes
And start when all the birds begin to sing.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“You wear your smart clothes on the pilgrimage,
Such pretty clothes as all the women here
Keep by them for their best: a velvet cap
And collar golden-broidered? They look well
On old and young alike.”

AGATHA.

“Nay, I have none—
Never had better clothes than these you see.
Good clothes are pretty, but one sees them best
When others wear them, and I somehow thought
’Twas not worth while. I had so many things
More than some neighbours, I was partly shy
Of wearing better clothes than they, and now
I am so old and custom is so strong
’Twould hurt me sore to put on finery.”

COUNTESS LINDA.

“Your grey hair is a crown, dear Agatha.
Shake hands; good-bye. The sun is going down
And I must see the glory from the hill.”

I stayed among those hills; and oft heard more
Of Agatha. I liked to hear her name,
As that of one half-grandame and half-saint,
Uttered with reverent playfulness. The lads

And younger men all called her mother, aunt,
 Or granny, with their pet diminutives,
 And bade their lasses and their brides behave
 Right well to one who surely made a link
 'Twixt faulty folk and God by loving both:
 Not one, but counted service done by her,
 Asking no pay save just her daily bread.
 At feasts and weddings, when they passed in groups
 Along the vale, and the good country wine,
 Being vocal in them, made them quire along
 In quaintly mingled mirth and piety,
 They fain must jest and play some friendly trick
 On three old maids; but when the moment came
 Always they bated breath and made their sport
 Gentle as feather stroke, that Agatha
 Might like the waking for the love it showed.
 Their song made happy music 'mid the hills,
 For nature tuned their race to harmony,
 And poet Hans, the tailor, wrote them songs
 That grew from out their life, as crocuses
 Grow in the meadow's moistness. 'Twas his song
 They oft sang, wending homeward from a feast—
 The song I give you. It brings in, you see,
 Their gentle jesting with the three old maids.

Midnight by the chapel bell!
 Homeward, homeward all, farewell!
 I with you, and you with me,
 Miles are short with company.

*Heart of Mary, bless the way,
 Keep us all by night and day!*

Moon and stars at feast with night
 Now have drunk their fill of light.
 Home they hurry, making time
 Trot apace, like merry rhyme.

*Heart of Mary, mystic rose,
 Send us all a sweet repose!*

Swiftly through the wood down hill,
 Run till you can hear the mill.
 Toni's ghost is wandering now,
 Shaped just like a snow-white cow.

*Heart of Mary, morning star,
 Ward off danger, near or far!*

Toni's wagon with its load
 Fell and crushed him in the road
 'Twixt these pine trees. Never fear!
 Give a neighbour's ghost good cheer.

*Holy Babe, our God and Brother,
 Bind us fast to one another!*

Hark! the mill is at its work,
 Now we pass beyond the murk,
 To the hollow, where the moon
 Makes her silvery afternoon.

*Good Saint Joseph, faithful spouse,
 Help us all to keep our vows!*

Here the three old maidens dwell,
 Agatha and Kate and Nell;
 See, the moon shines on the thatch,
 We will go and shake the latch.

*Heart of Mary, cup of joy,
 Give us mirth without alloy!*

Hush, 'tis here, no noise, sing low,
 Rap with gentle knuckles—so!
 Like the little tapping birds
 On the door; then sing good words.
 Meek Saint Anna, old and fair,
 Hallow all the snow-white hair!

Little maidens old, sweet dreams!
 Sleep one sleep till morning beams.
 Mothers ye, who help us all,
 Quick at hand, if ill befall.
 Holy Gabriel, lily laden,
 Bless the aged mother maiden!

Forward, mount the broad hillside
 Swift as soldiers when they ride.
 See the two towers how they peep,
 Round-capped giants, o'er the steep.
 Heart of Mary by thy sorrow,
 Keep us upright through the morrow!

Now they rise quite suddenly,
 Like a man from bended knee,
 Now Sanct Märgen is in sight,
 Here the roads branch off—good-night!
 Heart of Mary, by thy grace,
 Give us with the saints a place!



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